

Ironworkers Documentation Project
AUDIO LOG FORM

Interviewer's recording no(s): BH IW 1 [Wally Ritch]

Contact: Walter "Wally" Ritch

Address: Elmwood Park, IL

Interviewer: Bucky Hacker

Interview:

Date: July 20, 2011

Place: Union Headquarters, Local #63, 1819 Beach Street, Broadview, IL 60155

Other people present: None

Background noise: The Local IWU 63 headquarters can be a bit noisy and this can be heard in the background. It's an industrial building for the most part, so the cooling and heating system is a regular problem. Occasionally, the building even generates a line noise that is impossible to keep off the recording. Sometimes you can also hear people in the office section talking and laughing or somebody will walk into the room.

Equipment used: Marantz PMD 661 digital recorder and Shure SM57 microphone.

Recording medium used: Transcend 8 gigabyte SD memory card, uncompressed WAV format.

Recording engineer: Bucky Halker

Summary description of audio interview contents:

Wally Rich is a retired ironworker from Local 63 and also leads the retirees club for the local. In the interview we cover his background, his entrance in the trade, his career, changes in safety, and his views on the union and the labor movement.

Audio Interview Contents

Counter
No./Time

Topic

00:01

[Tell me your name and where you were born.] I'm Wally Ritch. I was born in Chicago. [What year were you born?] 1944. [Tell me a little bit about how you got into ironwork. Did you have a job before that? Where did you go to school?] Well, I went to school at, high school at St. Patrick's. And my one friend who I grew up with, he got in when he was 18 because his brother was in. He was an ironworker and I worked just different jobs. Then he says, "Why don't you try to get in?" And I was 25. And I took the test and I got right in through another ironworker. I had to go through the test and went to school and stuff. It wasn't just getting a book. [What was your first job as an ironworker? Do you remember?] My first job... As a matter of fact, the gentleman is in the other room. It was at a railing outfit. We did railings and stairs. It was American Ornamental Railing. I worked there through my whole apprenticeship. As a matter of fact, I was an indentured apprentice for the first three years. Then they quit the indentureship because they were having too much problems. [What was the indentured? What was different about that?] Well, when you're indentured, the union signs, the company signs, and you sign like a contract that you will stay with the company for your full four years. You can't quit and go to a different outfit. That's what was happening. Guys would work for a year or so with an outfit, then learn all the stuff and then some other outfit would give them an extra buck and then they'd quit and just go to the other outfit. This way you weren't stuck with the company but you had to stay with the company for your apprenticeship. But they guaranteed you, or were suppose to guarantee you forty hours. [A week...during that period...] Right. [What kind of work did you do for them?] I'd... We'd put in railings and stairs, and then when it was a little slow, you worked in the shop. You'd cut shims and you'd help them weld stuff. [Was there a lot of welding involved in that job?] Yes. And I went to Washburn Trade School. [I know where that was. It's out of business now I think, right?] Yeah. But that was where our union had our apprenticeship, at Washburn. Then, went there for the four years. That's where you learned your trade.

2:48 [And then after you left that job, what kind of work did you do over the years?] Well, basically after that, I basically did, like, windows and curtain walls. [That sounds like the high rises, the stuff you hang on the outside.] Yes, that or you're putting in windows basically. The outfit I was with for, oh, maybe 10-12 years in the architectural. That's what I did, just put in windows. [Did you work on some of the real tall buildings down town? You probably worked on everything, right?] Yeah. Most of them at that time, and I'm talking about like in the 80s. Most of the buildings going up were like 40-50 stories. And it was a lot of punch out windows, but they made money. And that's the bottom line. The company was making money. And then after that, I worked with just different outfits. I worked at Navy Pier. [When they were re-modeling everything out there?] Yes. I worked Navy Pier. Trump Tower. [Did you work on the windows in Trump Tower?] Yes. The curtain wall at Trump Towe. Another big one was Soldiers Field. [And how does that current wall... I'm vaguely familiar with the process, but do they bring in all sections on the cranes and then put them on or...] No, its... Its... There's so many different ways. You've got your mullions. You put in your mullions first and then the windows. The glass goes into the mullions. Now a days, its different is that they put clips out onto the edge and everything sits on the clips and it just keeps going up, like... Trump Towers was like that. [That speeds up the process a lot.] Definitely.

4:49 [Now were there other unions that there were sometimes jurisdictional things... Like how to separate you from... Was it the glazers that...] Glazers... Well, you know... It's been... They are our more mortal enemies. [LAUGHTER] It's just. I'm being honest. [Yeah, I understand.] Before, it used to be that you put in all the metal and then the glazers came by and put in all the glass. But then they started putting the glass into the frames. That's how we claimed everything. [The manufacturers did that...] Right. [Yeah.] Then you're just setting the frames. When it came to Soldiers Field, we did all the glass. The glazers... I don't know why... I hope I don't get anyone into trouble, but we did everything. The interior. They just... I don't know if they didn't want it because it was tough. It was tough. A lot of work, a lot of heavy work. And at Soldiers Field, we dealt with Gartner who was from Germany. A lot of their prints were in German. They were metric and it made for difficulty in installation. It did. But, like Navy Pier, like, I'm going back, that was like '91. I don't know if you've ever been there... [Many times.] ...but all the bones, all up in the ceilings and then the glass went into that and all the frames and stuff. [Is that all at the very end, what you're talking about? Or are you talking about...?] It's all the ceiling. [Oh right, ok.] And all that inside... It just, there was a lot of work. A ton of work. But I can't complain about my life as an ironworker. It just... It's a nice life, if you keep it in perspective. The way I always looked at it, the company's got to make money. It's not you making money, it's the company's got to make it. Because if the company doesn't make money, you're out of a job. And that's what and a why people should start looking at it, is that the company's got to make money. If they don't, you're out of a job. [It seems like the unions and the companies kind of get that in Chicago, not just the ironworkers. You know.] Yes. [What do you think it is about Chicago that makes it different than so many cities where there is such a hostile climate between...] Well... [Is it the history of the city and they had to work it out a long time ago and its working?] I just think that long time ago, everybody knows is that scabs couldn't come into the city for the longest time, because everybody was watching out for them, the non-union. And that's what kept this city strong, was the unions. As long as you kept them out, that's why it stayed strong. It's basically keeping the non-union out.

8:06 [Did you get involved with any strike activity? Did you have to go out?] You know, knock on wood, I've missed a few days because of a strike. Not in this city, no. I've been off because of lack of work, but not like it is today. Years ago, I think the last time... this city was in trouble with the union. Not trouble but... It was like 91-92 it was real slow. There was like 350 guys off. So for one year, I maybe worked a week here and a week there. But before that, we just kept busy.

8:55 [What do you think was the biggest change in the work from the time you started until now. You were talking about safety...] I would say the biggest is safety is because I don't know if nobody realized it but I always tell the apprentices today. When we used to do windows, and you were on the 40th floor, you'd put up two benches and a plank to walk across and you did your headers for your windows. You had no safety belt on. There was nothing in front of you. That's how you worked back then. Today's day and age, you can't be within 6 feet of the edge without a belt. That's the biggest change to me in ironworker safety. [When did you see that change start to take place? Was it in the 70s with OSHA?] No, no... It was after that. It was way after that. It was way after that. Then OSHA started stepping in and seeing people working by the edge with nothing on, no harness or nothing, or even a belt. At first it was just, you had a belt and a line attached to it. But then as it went on, it got more and more... You got the har-

nesses and everything like that. In today's day and age... You know... I mean it's totally different. [You seem to think that was a good change. I know one of the other guys was more nostalgic or... for the past. What's your perspective on that?] My perspective is... It's for the good. Because I would have had 4-5 guys that would be dead today if they didn't have their belt on because it happens. It happens. You make the slightest mistake and adios. [Were you ever seriously injured on the job at all? Or were you lucky?] Well, no, there was a couple of times when it was close. I... One time a louver fell on me and knocked me off the truck. I hurt my leg real bad. [And what's a louver?] That's where air goes through, those slat things on the sides of buildings. We were working there on a job down town. How we were picking it up, the louver tipped and knocked me off. Luckily that's all that happened. I just got a bruised up leg, but I was off for a couple of weeks because it swelled up and stuff like that.

11:44 Another time, this happened just before I retired. I was going up a lift. What do you call them? The scaffold lift that bricklayers use, the power one. [Yup.] We were running a job and it was like five stories up because we were working in an alley. [Wally left to take a phone call] So that time that I almost was closest to being killed is I was going up the scaffold and I think at that time, I was 60. And as I'm going up, I'm going up holding on with two hands, taking steps just to be safe. A laborer was coming down. Luckily I had both hands on it and he stuck right on me. Luckily, I had two hands on it because if I only had one, I wouldn't be here today. So that's.... But it happens. He was a young kid who didn't look. Because I was up 4 – 4 ½ stories. Anyway...luckily I was with two hands.

13:10 [When you started, was/were there different ethnic groups within the union that you remember? Or was that already breaking down by then?] No, that was... We didn't have nothing like that. I don't remember it. I don't remember it at all. There was times in the 80s that we had to take certain ethnic groups on the jobs but you made do. [And now you have this apprentice program here that seems to recruit all kinds of different people.] Right, right. Well, back then, we had all kinds too. [Oh you did.] Oh Yeah.

13:52 [Did you ever work in other job markets or were you lucky with real steady work here in Chicago. I talked to Rich, he was booming out to different parts of the country.] I was lucky here. I was lucky here. Then that '91-'92, my one nephew, his buddy owned... He was a builder. Believe it or not, I built porches and whatever this guy wanted to supplement working until the union got me another job. Back then you were 300 on a list, you knew you were going to be off for a while. I stayed here. I did a couple of times travel for this company, the Inland I was talking about. I traveled to the east coast, Philadelphia and New York. But that was just over-seeing. I was a boss and we were slow here, so my boss says, "You want to go to Philadelphia for a couple of weeks?" And I said sure. And I just helped on that job. I didn't do any work, just watched the guys and show 'em our system and...you know. I never really was a boomer boomer.

15:15 [Were there any customs that you guys had? I know there's topping off... I know Local #1 does a lot of that because you're way up on the top. Are there any customs that you guys had or rituals in your trade?] Yeah, well, it depends on what the job was like. I remember one job, we had one of the guys died. He didn't get killed on the job, but he died. So up in one of the corners, we put our names on one of the beams that was in already. That was about it. There

wasn't, nah I don't think... Back then the customs was maybe going to the bar at lunch. [Yeah.] But that was not okay back then, but we did it. [Rich talked about the drinking too, that there was a program now to kind of limit that more. Kind of educate guys. Did you see a big shift in that?] Without a doubt. Back in the 80s, that was common. Now it's rare because the companies... [Liability.] ...liability, plus the contractors. Believe it or not, some of the contractors, for a while, were following the guys at lunch to see where they go. If they see you going in the bars, when you come out, they go to the owner and say, "Hey, your guys are going to the bar. We can't have this." Which you can't blame them. It's different today. Very different.

17:17 [Anything like clothes that were distinctive about ironworkers or their...?] Just that, well, with us #63, we always had our helmets on backwards. That was us. [Did you have a certain kind of helmet?] No, no, but every one was backwards. And I guess today its not the same, because you can't do it anymore. [Oh, ok.] On your high rise jobs with the insurance companies, everything has to got to be just so. And years ago, you didn't have to wear safety glasses. Now, today, they are automatic on the job.

18:00 [Did you do welding at home or develop a hobby with welding? Like the signs out here and some other stuff...] No, not really. No. I did most of my welding when I first got in but... [Then you did more of the glass stuff...] But then towards... Today, it's more the glass and then they would always have certain guys who were just welders, welding the clips, or weld the beams or stuff like that. But way back then, I just did what I did because it was the job. There was no, no hobby about it. It was just part of the job.

18:41 [What year did you retire in?] I retired six years ago. [2005?] Yeah, I think it was. I think it was 2005...yeah, cause . . . End of 2004 or beginning of 2005. [And now are you the official president of the retire club or...?] Yeah, well, they call me chairman. But its... I just try to help the guys. Try to coordinate stuff. [So you have a monthly gathering here?] Yes. [And how many people are involved in the retirees club?] Usually we get between, I would say 30-40 on the average, I'd say. And then sometimes we'd get more, like in the wintertime, a lot of the guys go to Florida for the winter, so they don't show up. Its basically... Then this past year, we had five guys die. Some of the old-old timers. This guy, Steve, who was always here – he was 92. Eddy Root, he was 91. Our Ex BA, he just died. Don Holt. I don't know how old he was but he was up there. So, you loose guys...and now with things being slow, we got more guys retiring. [Taking early retirement?] Right. Yeah.

20:14 [Well, you've answered all of my questions. Is there something you want to talk about connected to your work or the union.] It's a nice life if you got it in your head that it's a job job to where you have to get up and go do it. You've got to want to. Like when I was at Soldiers Field, we worked 7/12s. And it was tough at the end because I was one of the bosses. It was tough. But you've got to want to do it. Just... And the kids today, they're hard to talk to because--'cause I'm being honest. For a while there, drugs played an important part and it still does in today's... Some of these kids were on it. You didn't want to get them in trouble, but they would screw up the job. So you sort of, you try to tell them, "Hey, this is your life. Don't screw it up." "Yeah, yeah, yeah." You got to like what you do. If you don't like it, find something else. That's with anything in life. You could be making \$150,000, but if you can find

something you like and make \$100,000, forget that \$50,000. Do what you like to do. Get up and want to do something. Other than that, I love being retired. [LAUGHTER]

END: 22:00